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## WHEN NO MAN PURSUES

Jeffery D. Woodhams

Proverbs 28:1 gives us a fascinating look into human psychology: “The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion.” The way the Bible perfectly captures the human experience in verses like this never ceases to amaze me. We’ll see this proverb at work today as we look in the gospel of Mark chapter 6. We’ll see a man with a guilty conscience react to the preaching of the twelve disciples.

With that in mind, would you open your Bibles to Mark 6 today? Let’s start by examining verses 12 and 13.

<sup>12</sup> *And they went out, and preached that men should repent.*

<sup>13</sup> *And they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them.*

As you recall, Jesus had sent these twelve men out to do His work and to tell people His message. He was calling the people to repent, and to show that the message was authentic, He gave His disciples certain powers for the duration of their mission. They were able, in the name of Jesus, to cast out demons and to heal the sick; but their main mission was to share the gospel. These twelve men, then, in groups of two, have spread out over the countryside doing great deeds for God. A big, big part of the lesson for the disciples and for everyone else is that the power of Jesus Christ extends beyond His immediate presence. Even though He Himself was not in those locations, His power reached there.

People are astounded. News spreads quickly that there is a great miracle worker who is doing things first in this town, then in that town—and the question becomes, “Who is this? Who is doing these things?” Of course, it’s all being done in the name of Jesus; but as the stories spread they get a little bit convoluted, as stories spread by word of mouth almost always do.

Let’s notice the reaction of a man with a guilty conscience, shall we? I’d like to read with you from verse 14 all the way to verse 29:

<sup>14</sup> *And king Herod heard of him; (for his name was spread abroad:) and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him.*

<sup>15</sup> *Others said, That it is Elias. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets.*

<sup>16</sup> *But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead.*

<sup>17</sup> *For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her.*

<sup>18</sup> *For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.*

<sup>19</sup> *Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not:*

<sup>20</sup> *For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.*

<sup>21</sup> *And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee;*

<sup>22</sup> *And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee.*

<sup>23</sup> *And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom.*

<sup>24</sup> *And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist.*

<sup>25</sup> *And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist.*

<sup>26</sup> *And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her.*

<sup>27</sup> *And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison,*

<sup>28</sup> *And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother.*

<sup>29</sup> *And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb.*

Right here at the beginning of this section, Mark repeats for us what Herod said and thought. Keep in mind that Herod is a Sadducee, which means that he did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. In fact, Sadducees didn't believe in anything supernatural. They were rationalists: "We don't believe in that hokey old religious stuff!" Yet here is Herod, a proud Sadducee, stating that these miracles must be an indication that John the Baptist is back from the dead, ready to cause him more mischief.

Mark also gives two other popular explanations about the miracle worker in Galilee: some people said it was Elijah, returned to earth (because, as you may recall, Elijah never died. He was separated from his disciple Elisha by a chariot of fire and then taken up to heaven in a whirlwind). Others said that the miracle worker was perhaps not Elijah, but was certainly some kind of prophet. But Herod—oh, Herod believed it was John the Baptist!

Now, why would he think this? After all, the John never raised anyone from the dead. In fact, I find no record that John did any miracles at all. John preached repentance—and that is all he did. Hearing that someone is going around preaching John's message of repentance, but now with the added elements of miracles, is enough to cause Herod to fear. That is why, starting in verse 17, we have this incredible flashback.

You may remember hearing about Herod the Great, the king of Israel when Christ was born—yes, the very one who tried to murder the infant Jesus after He was born in Bethlehem. Herod the Great had five wives, and he had children by each of them. Those children, in the great scandal of the day, began to marry each other, and then their children continued the family sin. The Herod in our chapter today is one of those children. He divorced his first wife in order to marry his half-brother's wife. That's bad enough, right? Well, it gets worse: she is directly related to both of them as a niece!

Along comes John the Baptist, who preached against this open scandal. Keep in mind that John was trying to turn the people of Israel, as a nation, back to God in repentance; yet here the leader of this part of Israel was openly living a sinful lifestyle. Now Herod, for his part, liked to hear John preach. He didn't always understand everything John said—the part rendered in the King James Version as “he did many things” in verse 20 you will see in newer versions something along the lines of his being “greatly puzzled.” The fact remains, though, that Herod was very interested in John's ministry.

Herodias, however, was a different story. Herodias was, as I have mentioned, Herod's niece and second wife. She was infuriated by John's teaching. Where our KJV says that she “had a quarrel against him,” the underlying Greek literally says that “she had it in for him.” Yes, sir! She had murderous intent toward John. He had no right to tell her whom she could and could not marry, don't you see? That's the way she saw it, at any rate.

Herod's compromise was to keep John locked up in prison. He didn't want John on the outside where Herodias could get at him, nor did he want John out there rebuking him openly; but he did want to keep John alive and under his watchful eye.

Herodias was devious, though: she waited for an opportunity. When Herod threw a feast for his officers and other very important people, she saw to it that her own daughter would be the star performer. The daughter was of marriageable age in that culture, which would mean she was likely in her middle teens. She performs an apparently very provocative dance, and Herod makes a foolish oath: he promises her anything she wants, up to half of his kingdom.

We need to pause right here. First of all we should mention that this Herod is not really a king, nor does he have a kingdom; rather, he is a tetrarch—he rules one fourth of his father's kingdom. What he has is not his to give. What we know now is that the phrase “half of my kingdom” was a popular expression of generosity. Anyone could say that, not just a king, if he were feeling generous. Today we might say, “Make a big wish.” It was not to be taken literally, and the young woman knew it.

So, what would you do if a rich man told you to make a big wish? What would you ask for? The young woman went to ask her mother, which seems reasonable. After all, who else would know what valuable things the king might have stored away somewhere? Who else would be a better judge of what would constitute a big wish?

Herodias has her chance. She orders her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist, and the daughter immediately complies. She charged right back into the king's chamber and requests the head of John the Baptist on a charger, or a platter.

Now, think about it—she got what she asked for, but was she happy? Was her mother happy? Was Herod happy? Was anyone else happy? I guarantee that was the sorriest birthday party ever from that point on. And after seeing a severed head brought into the banquet hall on a platter, do you think many people felt like eating? I suspect not.

Be careful what you wish for; you might just get it. What did these people get? Herod, in his lust, desired to impress the young woman and made her an offer which, I'm sure, he thought would increase his influence over her; but instead he got nothing of the sort. Do you really think he enjoyed the rest of his birthday party? Do you think anyone else enjoyed the rest of that party? I dare say not.

The young woman got her wish granted; but what exactly can you do with a severed head? I'm sure she made her mother proud for the time being, but a person who is so self-centered as her mother cannot be pleased for long.

What about Herodias? She got what she wished for, didn't she? Her nemesis, John the Baptist, the one who had pointed out her sinfulness, was gone. She had the proof. But getting rid of John the Baptist did not remove the problem, because she was the problem, not him. She may have focused her blame on him, but removing him did nothing at all to alleviate the problems in her sin-filled heart.

Now, folks, there is a lesson for us here as well. We might think, "If only that person were out of my life, I'd be so much better off." We might think, "If that person were out of this church, the church would be so much better off." Think again! If you think such thoughts about people, then you don't see them as God sees them. You don't see their value or their potential as God does. We have to realize that people thought the same way about Jesus, and they did kill him. We also have to realize that people in the church thought the same way about the apostle Paul. I'm sure you've read the letters to the Corinthians, right? So why should we expect human nature to be any different in our own day? If you find yourself wishing that someone else were removed from your life, removed from your church, I would caution you: you might get what you wish for. And it may very well be that the person you think is the problem isn't really the problem at all, but that the problem lies within you.

The point today is that as Jesus' disciples preached about repentance and did the exact works that Jesus told them to do, some people reacted badly. Some people acted out of fear because of their own ties to bitterness and hatred and scorn of God's previous messages to them. The message of the Gospel calls us to repentance, and if we will listen to that call, we will find forgiveness; but woe to us if we reject God's message of love! If we view God's message of love through the lens of our own pride, we will distort the message and harm ourselves, and very likely harm others in the process. Do not be afraid to accept God's message of repentance!